Rare blue whales spotted in Alaska

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Federal scientists have sighted a rare mammal in Alaska waters -- endangered blue whales, the largest animal known to live on Earth.

The sighting by researchers on board a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration vessel means the blue whale population may be getting healthier and expanding back to traditional territories.

"We are thrilled," Dr. Jay Barlow, chief scientist on board the McArthur II for a 120-day research cruise, said Friday from Kodiak. "It's been 30 years since we had a confirmed sighting up here."

Most recent population estimates show about 12,000 blue whales worldwide, with about 2,000 in U.S. waters off California in summer and fall. Others are found in found in the western Pacific, the North Atlantic, the Indian Ocean and the Antarctic. Blue whales in the Pacific can reach 85 feet long and 100 feet long in the Antarctic, Barlow said.

Blue whales are believed to migrate in the North Pacific in summer to northern feeding grounds, where they eat about four tons of krill per day, putting on fat for the winter. In winter, the eastern Pacific group migrates south to calving grounds off Mexico and Costa Rica, Barlow said.

Blue whales were hunted commercially between 1860s and the 1960s, with an estimated 350,000 killed during that period, including thousands in Alaska. They have been protected since 1965.

Scientists on the McArthur II are studying humpback whales on the research cruise, which ends in November. The vessel sails in zigzag patterns from shore up to 200 miles out in traditional whaling waters.

The vessel was about 100 nautical miles southeast of Prince William Sound, where the ocean is approximately two miles deep, on July 15 when spotters saw the first blue whale in late afternoon of an overcast day.

Three spotters on the flying bridge saw a tall blow 6-7 miles away, Barlow said. Blue whales blow plumes about 20 feet high, but from so far away, no spotter was willing to speculate it was a blue whale rather than a smaller fin whale -- the second-largest whale -- which had been seen regularly.

The ship turned toward the whales, and when the animals were within two miles, spotters using 25-power pedestal-mounted binoculars could see they were blue whales, easily identifiable by their tiny dorsal fins.

"The real giveaway is the shape and size of the dorsal fins, and the coloration," Barlow said. Fin whales are black. Blue whales look blue in the water and slate-gray out.

Whales returning to traditional feeding areas

For whale researchers, Barlow said, the sighting was huge.

"There have been many marine mammal surveys in Alaska by ship and aircraft, and countless years of

small boat research on humpback whales in Alaska, and yet, these are the first fully documented sightings of blue whales here in the past three decades," Barlow said.

Whale researcher Kate Stafford of NOAA's Alaska Fisheries Science Center in Kodiak said the sighting did not surprise her.

"We've been hearing eastern and western North Pacific whales on deep water recordings in the Gulf of Alaska," she said. "We knew they must be there, but because our instruments are so far apart, we can't pinpoint the location of calling whales."

Researchers were able to get close enough to obtain skin and blubber samples, which will be used for genetic testing and pollutant studies. Samples were obtained by firing a hollow-tip dart from a small boat 25 t0 50 yards away. They also took photos.

"The genetic samples, pollutant signatures and high-resolution photographs may provide clues to help us figure out where these whales are coming from," Barlow said.

Digital images were transmitted to blue whale researcher John Calambokidis of Cascadia Research. One whale had been photographed off the coast of California in 1995 and 1998, Barlow said.

"That confirms that in fact the Alaska animals ... are the result of a re-invasion of their traditional feeding areas," Barlow said, rather than a remnant population.

The McArthur II cruise is part of NOAA's SPLASH research, which stands for "Structure of Populations, Level of Abundance and Status of Humpbacks." The project involves NOAA scientists and hundreds of other researchers from the United States, Japan, Russia, Mexico, Canada, the Philippines, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua and Guatemala. The SPLASH program is dedicated to assessing humpback whale populations throughout the North Pacific Ocean, and the McArthur II's role has been to assess deep-water populations.

The McArthur II is based in Seattle. So far it has traveled along the coast of Washington and British Columbia and through the Gulf of Alaska. It will continue along the Aleutian Islands to the edge of Russian waters before returning south.